

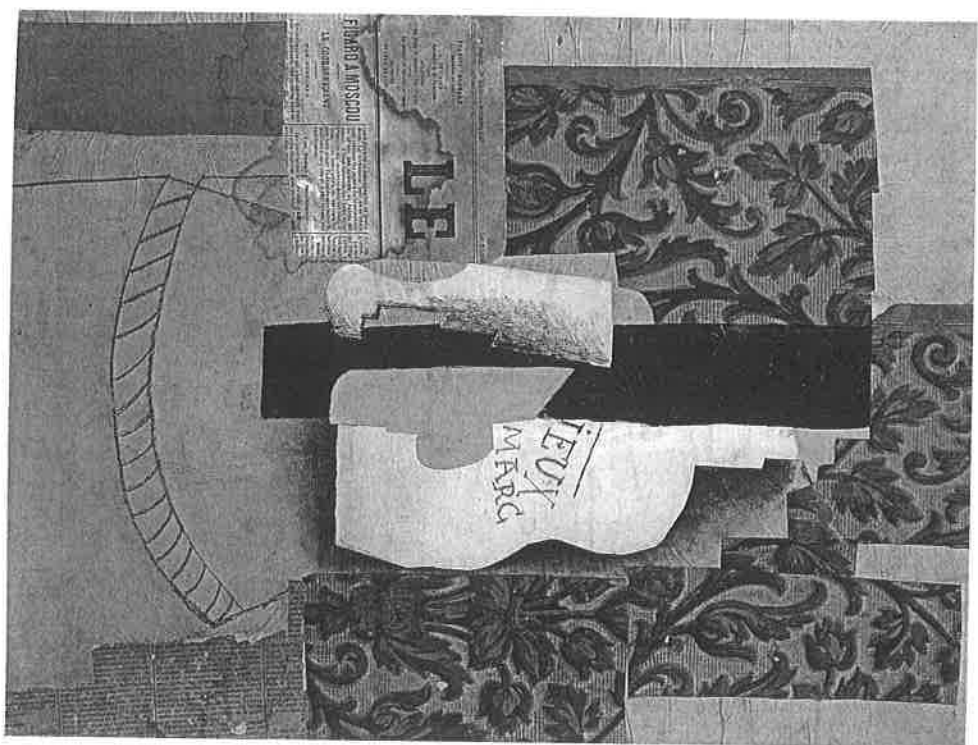
## Collage: Diversions, Contradictions and Anomalies

Sally O'Reilly

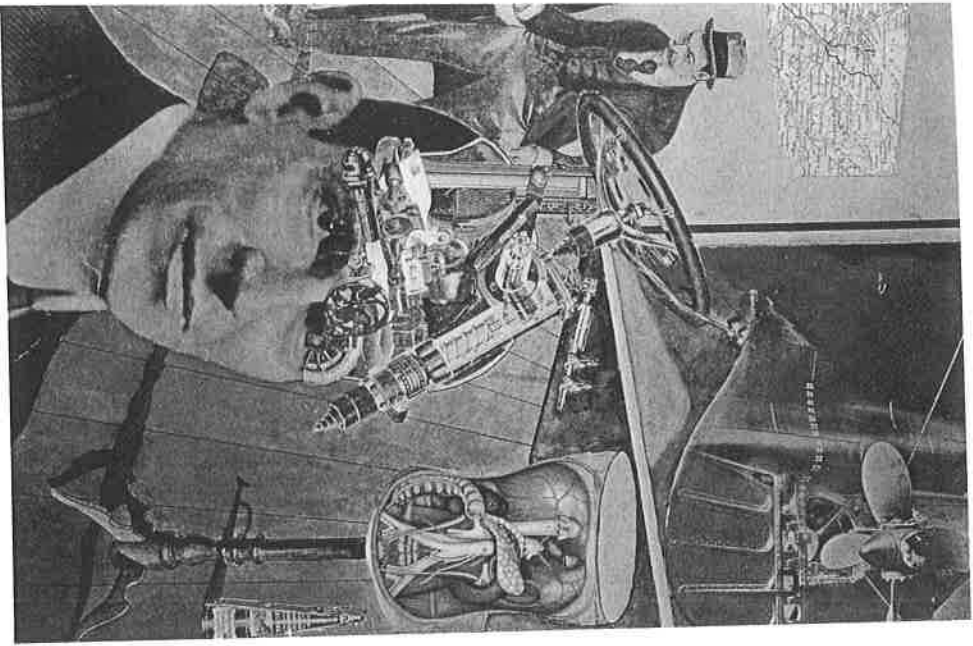
Collage's integral methods of disorientation and displacement have so inherently reflected turbulent developments in twentieth-century art, science and geopolitics that our response might be to categorise the whole genre as iconoclasm, or subversive fantasy. But what is particularly fascinating about contemporary collage is its relation to its radical history of trauma, disruption and desire now that these basic tenets have been played out, absorbed and normalised in wider Western culture. Whether our world really has become a collage through technological intervention—or if it is our perception that has changed—is not entirely clear. More likely we find ourselves in a reflexive situation, with technology and perception intractably interrelated. In either case, the idea that collage presents new formal possibilities or radical subjectivities is no longer easy to sustain.

Collage's rejection of singularity, rationality and coherence is matched and, at times, superseded by mainstream media and culture at large, where channel-hopping, surfing, streaming, pieceworking and hot-desking are fast becoming familiar processes; it might be argued, then, that collage is no longer a specialist revolutionary tool, and yet, these new verbs have still to achieve the elemental associations of those that collage summons forth: cutting, tearing, separating, abutting, contradicting, interrupting, juxtaposing, substituting. These are fundamental acts with visceral or even ontological resonance, compared to the clean, applied, leisure-like men of new methodologies. The verb, as opposed to the noun, is symptomatic of a worldview in which movement and rates of change are at least as important as form and static position. And indeed, the induction of collage into art coincided with enormous cultural and epistemological shifts in which speed, acceleration and flux factored greatly.

Although collage techniques were employed to an extent in the rarefied contexts of poetry and religious iconography in ancient China, the Heian period in Japan and Medieval Europe, they didn't attain mass appeal until the nineteenth century, in the form of scrapbooks, keepsakes and collections of ephemera. In 'fine art', however, the virtuosity of the painter and sculptor remained superior to the quick fix of the sentimental hobbyist, and it wasn't until the early twentieth century that collage began to be appreciated for its formal and conceptual resonance despite its apparent non-virtuoso nature. The eventual acceptance of collage by intellectuals might be explained in a number of ways; perhaps it was the lure of the everyday café experience that urged artists to consider ephemera—menus, newspapers, labels and handbills—as not simply subject matter but also a legitimate medium. Or painters may have been influenced by the photography of Eugene Atget or the early anthropological films of Mitchell and Kenyon, which reflected the increasingly mercantile



Public figures  
collage with  
paper cut out, double cut glass, circa 1930  
divided into wallpaper, newspaper and  
miscellaneous paper  
© Mitchell and Kenyon, DACS 2008  
Image courtesy The Stedinger Art Library



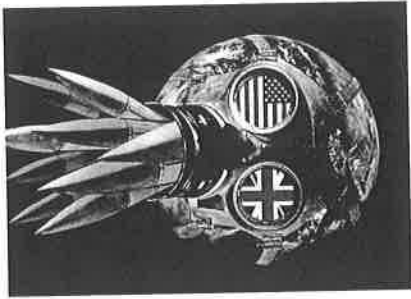
Raoul Hausmann  
 Rain of Home, 1920  
 Collage  
 © DACS 2008  
 Image courtesy: Grauboni/  
 The Bridgeman Art Library

patchwork of modern urban life. Or perhaps collage was employed in an attempt to address the prismatic Einsteinian universe that was emerging, where coherence and consistency were fast losing currency.

Whatever the underlying impetus, the rudimentary language of collage developed by Picasso and Braque signalled a rearrangement of categories in art and perception, and their interplay between orders of actuality and depiction, tactility and visibility, harness and volume, contributed to the momentum that would eventually tip pictorial representation into crisis. Although it is neither possible nor desirable to track an evolutionary account of collage without sacrificing the nuances of individual intentions and effects, a broad, historical overview could at least demonstrate the phantasmagorical plurality/let loose by the apparently basic act of cutting out and sticking down. It might also establish how fragmentation, hybridisation, appropriation and simultaneity have come to be perceived as more relevant analogues for human experience than the single coherent illusory image.

For Russian Constructivists, for example, collage was a process by which facture became paramount over representation. Vladimir Tatlin's amalgams of wood, foil, sheet metal and rivets drew the image into palpable presence, echoing the Constructivist anti-art rhetoric based on Communist ideas of historical materialism. The aim was to construct, rather than depict, as 'construction is organisation. It uses the readymade substances of things.'<sup>11</sup> The poeury of found material and objects was extrapolated in Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* and Robert Rauschenberg's *Combrines*, which transform rags and refuse into the riches of the *bricolage*. Venturing into the third dimension, the influence of real life becomes even more pressingly felt, as representation is usurped by the actual. To inhabit pell-mell installations by Jason Rhoades and Thomas Hirschhorn, then, is to encounter the ideas, stories and artefacts they are made up of, to experience interrelations and contradictions in time and space.

The Dadaists' use of collage, whether in image or cut-up poetry, articulated a drive for radical transgressions of category, hierarchy and logic. In 1916, Hugo Ball established Cabaret Voltaire as a protest against the political atmosphere of nationalist Europe in the throes of the Great War, and the incoherence and fragmentation of Ball's own phonetic poetry was an attempt to find the universalising capacity of utterance beyond the 'nationalising' tendencies of language. The Surrealists expanded the Dadaists' veneration of the worthless, discarded and meaningless to the point of political axiomatic. Surrealist photography, film and automatic writing aligned notions of chance in Dadaist cut-up poetry with the workings of the subconscious, while an insistence on the importance of psychological interior as well as external, positivist fact—of dream state as well as logically motivated action—produced montage on a personal as well as universal scale. As the *Comte de Lautréamont* encapsulated in his formulation of the marvellous—"the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella"<sup>12</sup>—the magic of incongruity operated not only in the image, but also causally and phenomenologically. Much contemporary collage draws on the symbolic and metaphorical potential of illogical combination, radical subjectivity and



Top: Javier Rodríguez  
Melincoro, 2006  
(collage on paper,  
30 x 20 cm)

Bottom: Peter Kennard  
Defended to Death, 1963  
(remade for the occasion of  
Iraq Urban Mass, 2003)  
photomontage

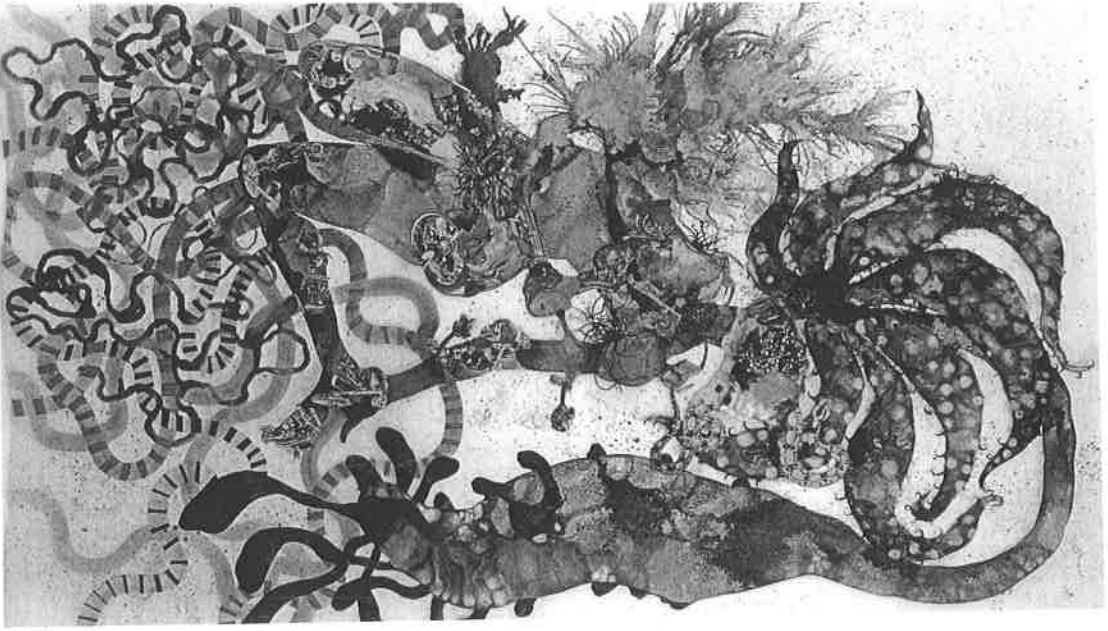
fantastical self-governance. Javier Rodríguez' work, for instance, recalls the collages of Max Ernst through his use of antique prints and uncanny breaches of human anatomy. His reconfigured historical source material brings the iconography of an unknowable past before the contemporary viewer, emphasising the universality and perversity of certain motifs. The monstrous human head in *Melincoro*, for example, might be thought of either in terms of outmoded notions of *homunculi* or current ideas in psychology.

The Surrealist tropes of incongruity and unstructuredness gave wings to mid-century absurdist inclinations. The "Theatre of the Absurd" was a term coined by Martin Esslin to denote the sense of existential hopelessness in a godless universe, which he felt influenced the writing of Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett and others. Esslin described a "sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions".<sup>2</sup> Collage's rejection of logical depiction and rational space, its isolation of images from their usual context and dissolution of traditional subject matter, also chimes with playwright and dramatist Eugene Ionesco's definition of the absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose... cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost. All his action become senseless, absurd, useless".<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s, John Heartfield's photomontages developed out of his creeping disenfranchisement with Dada's absurdity, and the suspicion that absurdity was itself part of the bourgeois malaise, an excuse for inaction. As Heartfield became engaged with Marxist dialectic his photomontages grew teeth, turning savagely on social and political issues and determining to make the invisible visible. Photomontage was also put to hard labour by agit-prop posters of both the left and the right, from the Soviet Five Year Plan to the urgent slogans of Mussolini's Fascist Party. It is from here, perhaps, that the indexical relationship between collage and empowerment—or disempowerment—seems. In the hands of the politically motivated its processes make monsters of recognizable figures, the everyman and even the notion of tranquillity itself, which can be used to prod us out of cultural amnesia. Contemporary political satirists, such as Peter Kennard, continue this programme of scandalous revelation and memorialisation, pouncing on circulating news stories or divulging unpublished facts, often illustrating them in shockingly straightforward ways. In Kennard's *Dofounded to Death*, for example, the planet wears a gas mask, with American and Russian flags positioned in each eye hole and a clutch of missiles sprouting from the mouthpiece: an unambiguous note of alarm issued to a world gripped by the Cold War. And yet, interestingly, few artists tackle political issues as quite such a head-on tilt. Most appear to favour the obfuscating, complicating strategies of collage, whether through additive and cumulative means, as in Wainwright Munn's cocktail of beauty, pornography and horror, or subtractive, as in Pierre Bismuth's simple cutaway clothing that paradoxically renders his glamour models dressed. And yet the critical scope of even an oblique approach to matters of identity and geopolitics is immense by dint of the symbolism of the cut or tear as antipathy, aggression and trauma. Objects and



Max Ernst  
The Sorcerer's Apprentice, 1920  
oil on paper  
© ADP, 087, Paris and DACS, London, 2008  
Image courtesy Groudan/  
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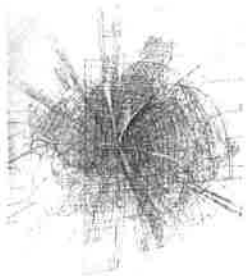
figures out of place, perhaps dropped into hostile environments or absurdly incongruous situations, are universal symbols of individual desperation. Cutting or tearing, the essential verbs of collage, symbolizes violation and trauma, like a guttural, visceral rupture. Symbolically and literally, it speaks of intervention and vandalism, violating private and communal property, converting copyright and scrambling identities. In fact Schwitters' enigmatic word *merz* originally appeared in a work as a fragment of *kommerz* (or *commerce*), suggesting a flippancy gesture aimed at capitalism. Another, apparently more benign strand of mid-century assemblage can be characterized as the synthesis of gesture, jazz and the improvisatory, performative impulse that emerged in theatre, music and the visual arts of the 1950s. The beat stream of consciousness and Allan Kaprow's "Happenings" found equivalence in the composite objects of Ed Kienholz and Claes Oldenburg, which suggested a post-war disquiet, proposing the world as a prismatic, contingent and image-saturated *mélange*. Interdisciplinary performances of the Black Mountain College and Judson Dance Theater—where Oldenburg performed *Pelican*, a duet with a ballerina, a pair of rollerskates and a parachute—and the splice-saturated films of the Lettrists and Structuralists provide historical momentum for contemporary time-based artists working collaboratively, appropriatively or tromping conventions of a traditional medium. Christian Marclay and Tracey Moffat, for example, both expose cinematic conventions in their practice: Marclay's typological patchwork of gunshot scenes accrue into a figure of effortless gunfire, while in *Lip*, Moffat's montage of Hollywood representations of Black maids make the endemic stereotyping absurd.

Collage also catered to the Fluxus objective of ephemerality and subversion, as well as Pop's insistence on the conflation of "high" and "low" culture and the Situationists' perpetual undermining of hierarchical orthodoxies and demand for radical subjectivity and individual empowerment. Although these practices are less directly confrontational compared to Heurfield's, their reconfiguration of image and information categories are similarly dissident and revelatory. The effect of this constant affirmation of collage's recalcitrance is that now, even with work on the edge of abstraction, is read through the collageist's programme, such as in Fred Tomaselli's cascading patterns cutting psychedelia over benign decoration, and in Julie Mehretu's geometric constructions, which appear to be more concerned with deconstruction than assembly. The difference between these two artists' mode of construction also impacts on how the imagery is perceived. Tomaselli's cut-out images, pills and leaves are held at an extra remove in a layer of resin, enhancing their other-worldliness, while the flat immediacy of Mehretu's straight-edged forms, although creating the illusion of three-dimensional space, reside decisively on a surface with a Constructivist accent.

Further cementing its symbolic properties, collage also assumed a practical application in the former German Democratic Republic during the 1980s, when all art and media publications were rigorously censored by the state. Whereas literature was subject to stringent limitations, imagery that contained text was

Oppebie Wengsch/Mdu  
Agony You, 2008  
mixed media collage  
296.2 x 137.1 cm

Top: Fred Tomaselli  
Colony, 2003  
leaves, photocollage, acrylic  
and resin on wood panel  
152.4 x 152.4 cm  
Image courtesy James  
Cohan Gallery



Bottom: Julie Mehretu  
Cipher, 2006  
ink and acrylic on canvas  
123.2 x 153.7 cm  
© Julie Mehretu  
Collection Nicolas and Jennie Greenberg Kolczyn  
Image courtesy The Rowet,  
New York and Corrie Gelschuer, Berlin  
Photograph Erno Szavix

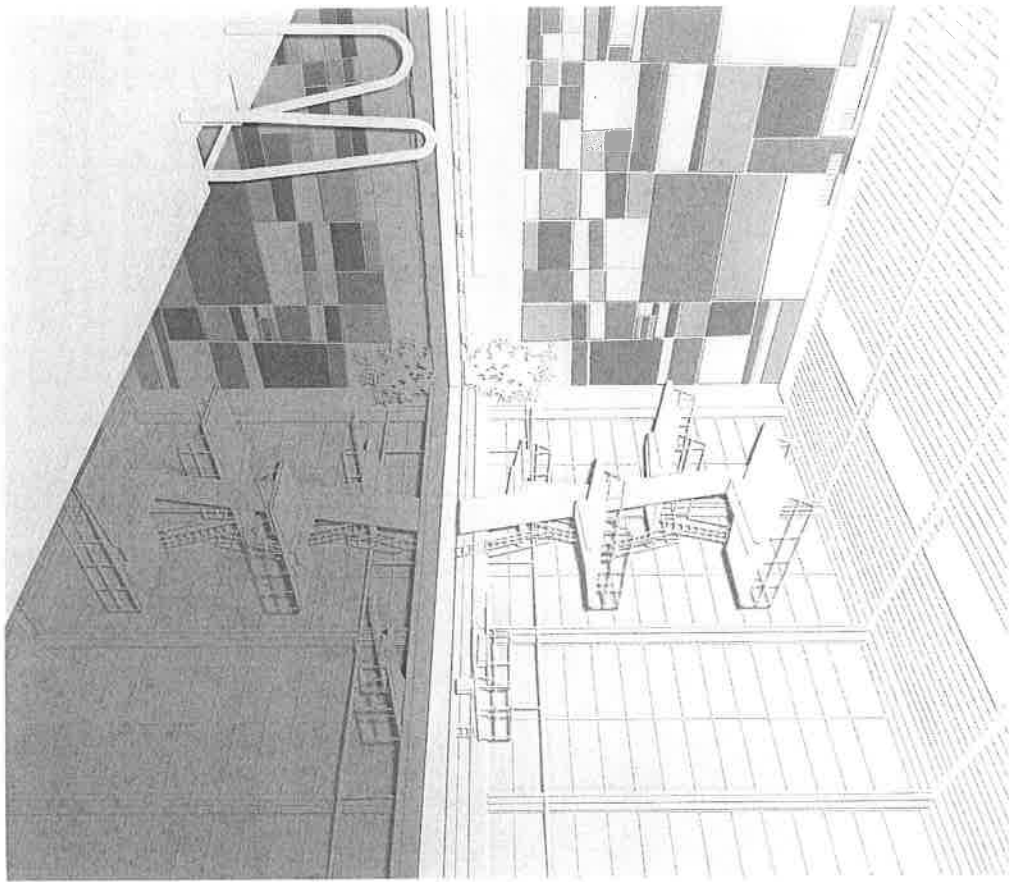


Malenie Carvalho  
 Untitled (Landscape Garden), 2003  
 collage and watercolour on paper  
 122 x 152 cm

more jealously monitored, so that it became a Trojan Horse for critical content or improper form. The resultant cut-up aesthetic was adopted by Western European counterculture and the underground music hazines of the 1980s, where text was often shredded and reassembled over underlying photocopied images, although punk's mimicking of the ransom note had already performed a strange two-step, whereby the cloak of anonymity became the badge of the anti-establishment.

The photocopied flyers of this generation necessarily remind us of the influence of technology on collage. It is an art form that closely follows the contours of reprographic developments as it wrenches images directly from mainstream conduits of desire, such as magazines, film, television and the Internet. Collage might be thought of as trafficking in the imagery of excess and plugging back on its dissemination, while retaining the materiality of the original. The London-based group CutUp, for example, perform urban guerrilla tactics, splicing and reconfiguring billboards, turning a Nescafé advertisement into a portrait of a young 'hoodlum', for instance. Reclaiming the marketing industry's mass-produced imagery at once interrupts the impact of a campaign by diverting attention from the product, and demonstrates the potential for individual expression in an urban landscape dictated by commerce. This is a classic interventionist strategy but, then again, the act of scavenging detritus, debris and offcuts might also be an officially sanctioned force for good at a time when natural resources are dwindling and the manufacture of objects and production of byproducts is discouraged. At times artists might assume a redemptive role, repurposing waste or pollution, like Melanie Carvalho's exquisite romantic gardens wrought from discarded, mass-produced magazines. Bringing landscape painting in touch with the very processes that threaten it is a complex gesture and the seductive fecundity of Carvalho's imagery counters any latent ethical pronouncement on excess. At other times this approach to collage might work like inoculation, obviously alerting us to the bizarre nature of human overproduction, as in Hew Locke's amalgams of plastic wotouts, which make ridiculous the tackiness of nationalism and off-the-shelf adornment.

Collage need not necessarily spawn a Frankenstein's monster or be wielded as a weapon of dissent or criticism, however. Abstral and comariness can also provide the conditions of humour. One of the prime manoeuvres of the comedian is to shuffle taxonomies and choreograph scandalous incongruities. And the corruption of categories is the force behind the pun, where two elements supposedly never to meet under ordinary circumstances are demonstrated to have an unexpected point in common. Bob and Roberta Smith's *Thought Examination* series, for instance, bring the formalism of high Modernist sculpture and vegetables into riotous conjunction. The Smiths' practice as a whole is an ongoing series of ruminous acts and positions, proclaiming anti-establishment sentiment while also working with mental health patients on educational art projects. For the Smiths, the transgression of categories happens not only in their imagery, but at the level of production too. Material mis-direction could also be put to poetic effect, as in Lucy Williams' rendering of classic,



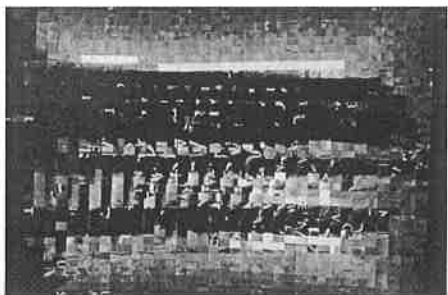
Lucy Williams  
 Indoor Pool (with mural), 2007  
 mixed media on board  
 78 x 70 cm  
 © The Artist  
 Image courtesy  
 Timothy Bayler Gallery, London

Modernist architecture in the stuff of craft and domesticity, from cut paper and cellophane to tapestry and pebble dashing. Her handmade facades scotch the myth of epic perfection of these architectural unobtainables as her tabletop alterations and interpretations deviate into whimsy and aesthetic caprice.

Collage is often perceived as an inclusive art form, not only can we all understand how a collage is made, but we are all qualified to make them, and this apparent lack of skill can often make the process, as well as the outcome, seem arbitrary. If meaning can be manufactured by the combination of any two images, then what are the merits of one juxtaposition over another? Rather than being entirely contingent and unstructured, though, collage requires a different ability to imbued image-making. The collagist must pre-empt the reception of visual information, manipulate the associations each element brings and orchestrate their interaction with one another and the viewer. The collagist is a tinsmith, ushering and holding back significance, or an unethical anthropologist who mingles with the very syntax of a culture. John Stealer describes how images in everyday life disappear into their use, whereas in obsolescence they reappear. His bisected portraits, despite their hardly mysterious fabrication, emerge from his cramped studio as mythical anonymous demigods within our culture of celebrity.

With the malleability of objects in illusory space creating a veritable fantasia of scale, proximity or causality, it must be difficult for an artist to resist authoring barmy simultaneities, eerie multiple universes or jaw-dropping coincidences. Collage empowers the production of meaning server-side, so to speak. And just as the initial proliferation of collage coincided with the establishment of the telecommunications and transport systems that would lead to the non-linear and exponential expansion of today's information networks, now collage is a succinct reflection of their effect. Collage has become not only a symptom of cultural overproduction but analogous to our altered perception and systems of knowledge and belief. Repulsion and attraction between elements turns the collaged image into a stage for the theatrics of deconstruction, where a pictorial element may retain its individual identity, but is infected, warped or even made unrecognizable by its new context. Meaning is proven to be neither universal nor fixed, but fashioned afresh with each reconfiguration of context. Like Structuralist theory—where meaning is constituted through contrast and interdependency—it is the relationships between contiguous symbols, signifiers and motifs that determine our understanding over and above a fixed *a priori* reality. And as the deconstructionist considers the text as a point of production, or even conflict, where knowledge, rhetoric and aesthetic pleasure continuously disrupt one another, collage too becomes a way of thinking about looking and knowing. Criticality is embedded in collage's methodology as well as its content. As a mode of construction, it perpetually on show—whether through the evidence of the actual cut or the semantic attaching between elements. In an otherwise seamless digital construction, unimpeachable artists has been thrown out the window: is the real legacy and poignancy of collage.

<sup>1</sup> Istockphoto, Alexander, and Vanya Skopanova, "Prodiectiva Manifesto" (Moscow, 1921), *Requenter Rodchenko*, David Elliott ed., Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1977.  
<sup>2</sup> Boris, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, p. 23.  
<sup>3</sup> Jacques-Louis Bernin, *David's "sermo de la ville"*, *Colloque de la Compagnie Médicenne des Académiciens de France*, in Estlin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 23.



Collis  
 Untitled, 2007  
 re-ordered bus stop advertising poster in lightbox  
 180 x 120 x 9 cm  
 Image courtesy Severin